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# THE BEGINNINGS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NEW ENGLAND<sup>1</sup>

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## I

The study of the origin and evolution of American institutions, though interesting and profitable, is beset with numerous difficulties. For some were inherited directly from Great Britain or the Continent and reproduced with but little or no change; others were more or less modified by the change in environment; still others were essentially new products devised to meet needs and conditions often peculiar to some particular colony or section.

American colonial education well illustrates these principles. Some of its main features, together with the means employed to carry on the educational process, were a direct inheritance from Great Britain, Holland, or other European countries. The colonies were settled by civilized peoples who were inheritors of educational ideals, institutions, and practices, which had been developing for a thousand years or more.<sup>2</sup> Among these may be mentioned the classical culture of the ancient world and the belief that the principal subject-matter to be employed in the later educational process should be Latin and Greek, keys to the literature of the peoples who used these languages. From the mediaeval world came the notion that education should be more or less under control of the church and clergy, and that the inculcation of religious ideals and beliefs should be one of the principal motives in education.<sup>3</sup> The Renais-

<sup>1</sup> This study is from a forthcoming work by the author on the History of Education in the American Colonies to 1783, several additional chapters of which will appear in the *School Review* in the immediate future.

<sup>2</sup> An interesting but brief chapter on this subject may be found in E. Eggleston, *The Transit of Civilization from England to America in the Seventeenth Century* (1901), chap. v.

<sup>3</sup> A. F. Leach, *English Schools at the Reformation*, 1546-48; F. Watson, *English Grammar Schools to 1660*.

sance intensified the former and the Reformation the latter of these two ideals. With the opening of the modern era, the notion developed more rapidly that it was the duty of the state to control or aid education in the interest of religion or good citizenship,<sup>1</sup> the former in particular where there was a close union between church and state; the latter because of a growing belief that education was an insurance against ignorance or a relapse to barbarism, and a necessary means to preserve and pass on to future generations the experience and knowledge of the race. Still another inherited notion was that of private philanthropy. From an early date generous individuals had dedicated a portion or all of their wealth to the cause of education.<sup>2</sup> The motive was sometimes religious, sometimes secular. Besides these more general principles, the colonists inherited not only many of the forms of organized institutions for education, such as the grammar,<sup>3</sup> parish, and charity school, but also the machinery for administration, such as charters, statutes, officials, etc. To a great extent they were dependent on imported teachers, English and European notions of the curriculum, methods of instruction, textbooks, educational theories, etc.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of other features of colonial education the original forms were often modified by the new environment. For example, chartered schools endowed with lands, so common in England, were less important in the colonies, because land was plentiful, cheap, and failed to produce an income sufficient to defray expenses. Again, the apprenticeship system was unimportant in England as a means of education, but in certain of the colonies it was almost the only means whereby poor children could obtain any instruction. An example of one new feature was the principle set forth in the educational act of Massachusetts, 1647, that when a territorial division, the town, had a specified number of families, it must set up certain types of schools. This principle was unique, for never

<sup>1</sup> De Montmorency, *State Intervention in English Education*, 1902.

<sup>2</sup> N. Carlisle, *A Concise Description of the Endowed Grammar Schools in England and Wales*, 2 vols., 1818: a collection of charters, statutes, etc., of a large number of schools, with some descriptive matter.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Stowe, *English Grammar Schools in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, 1908.

<sup>4</sup> A chapter on the background of American colonial education will be included in the work mentioned above.

before had any legislative body enacted just such a law and enforced it with suitable penalties. Of the principles mentioned, those inherited were not reproduced by all the colonies in exactly the same form. Indeed certain features prominent in one colony do not appear at all in others. Again some were modified by one colony more than by another.

During the colonial period, there were certain forces which hindered uniformity in educational development, such as diverse race elements, environment, economic conditions, and religious beliefs. We must consider the variety of institutions, customs, and ideals brought over by the English, Dutch, Scotch-Irish, and Germans, the great planter of the South, the patroon of the New Netherlands, and the small farmer of New England. We must remember the antagonism between Puritan and Quaker, Established Churchman and Presbyterian, Lutheran and Catholic, and note that all these forces tended to produce a diversity which would hinder educational unity, particularly in certain of the colonies.

On the other hand, there were forces promoting uniformity in education. Within each section environment, economic conditions, and intermarriage tended to modify racial differences. Political and judicial control were in the hands of the English, and hence each colony was under one system which tended toward a common type. Most of the printed matter produced in the colonies as well as that imported was in the English language. The English occupied the seaboard while other race elements were largely in the back country—the frontier. Thus the former controlled the best lands, the slavery system, trade and commerce, with the opportunity to unify diverse elements through laws, courts, newspapers and books, and higher institutions of learning.

Sufficient has been said to show that educational development in the colonies must have varied widely. The complexity of the subject is one reason why comparatively little has been written in this field. From the standpoint of the historian writers on the history of education have been less successful in presenting their topic than those in other special fields, such as social, political, or constitutional history. This may be due to the fact that educational history has been greatly neglected by historical scholars, and

because other writers have often approached the subject rather from a philosophical than a historical standpoint. Some of these authors have not been trained as historians, and their books give evidence of a lack of knowledge of important sources bearing on educational history, as well as a lack of training in interpreting the sources which they have used. Again there is a failure to discuss factors which must be carefully considered if the history of education is to be adequately treated. Like the history of religion, it should be written with sufficient historical background and emphasis on other phases of man's social activity, to make clear all the forces that have essentially influenced what we call educational history in its narrower sense.

Our conception of what factors may have influenced the progress of education before the Revolution is largely determined by our notions of what is meant by the term "education."<sup>1</sup> A conventional view would confine the subject to the origin and description of organized institutions of learning, subject-matter and methods of instruction, and the theory or philosophy underlying the educational systems. Often histories of education consider little more than this last phase. But they should be called, more properly, histories of educational theory. They bear much the same relation to educational history that the history of economic theory bears to economic history.

To explain satisfactorily the origin and evolution of all phases of education in the American colonies, one must consider many influences, such as racial, economic, political, social, literary, intellectual, and particularly religious factors—all of which tend to perpetuate, modify, or change prevailing practices. The ideals of the teaching force, the method and textbooks used, and the curriculum as a whole are, to a large extent, the product of ideals and achievements of previous generations. It is clear, then, that to enumerate the factors that influence the progress of education one must take into consideration a great variety of facts and forces. This view implies that educational development is dependent on all the factors which influence human life and progress.

<sup>1</sup> See a paper by the author: "Factors Influencing the Development of American Education before the Revolution," *Proc. Miss. Valley Hist. Assoc.*, V, 190-206.

The most important contributory factors which influenced the educational development of each of the American colonies were ethnic or race elements—including inherited ideas or practices and the spirit of the race; environment—including geographical conditions, climate, and physiography; economic conditions—including distribution of land and population, industrial organization, and economic well-being; religion—including the relation of church and state, religious motives for education, and the influence of religious sects in promoting and controlling education; political conditions—including the relation of the state and education, the influence of forms of local government, such as town or parish; social conditions—including home influences, social classes and groups; intellectual conditions—including the proportion of educated men to the total population, average intelligence of the race, and the means of distributing knowledge, such as printing, libraries, and newspapers. The progress of education is dependent on all these factors and others not mentioned. In short, to understand its real development, we must know the reaction of geographical, economic, religious, political, social, and intellectual influences on education in its narrower meaning. In the light of what has been said, it is obvious that any detailed study of colonial education requires a survey of Old World social and intellectual conditions, as well as educational theories and practices, particularly in England. We must know what notions and traditions the colonists started with, in order to determine how far the educational institutions of the New World were reproductions, how far modified by new conditions, and what features were wholly new. Then the conditions within each group of colonies must be studied to determine the features of the educational system common or peculiar to each, with the reasons therefor, how far the groups influenced each other by law or custom, and the processes by which educational uniformity was attained, or for what reasons variations persisted.

## II

We may now consider in detail the more important factors which influenced the beginnings of public education in New England. The number and character of its educational institutions,

as well as the rapidity with which they were established, warrant a careful study of the conditions and forces which account for such a development. By 1660 three of these colonies, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Haven, had passed a remarkable series of educational acts and established agencies for education which in comparison with other colonies at the same date, such as New York or Virginia, were truly extraordinary. Indeed we may say that by this date several essential principles of elementary and secondary education had been formulated and the foundation of the American public school laid.

To understand the reasons for and nature of these institutions, one needs to keep in mind those more general influences already mentioned, viz., inherited features from the ancient and mediaeval world, intensified by the Renaissance and the Reformation, the philanthropic movement in England, 1550-1640, with the attendant increase in the civil control of education, the inherited types of educational institutions, methods, organization, and administration, and the content and philosophy of education. But such inherited notions and characteristics did not of themselves always lead to further activity, else it would be difficult to account for the history of Plymouth, Rhode Island, Virginia, and other colonies where progress was so slow. We must consider then those additional factors which influenced the character of the educational institutions of New England.

One group of important factors centers about the personality and character of the settlers. This involves such questions as their general motives in migrating, relative strength of contending motives after settlement, average intelligence, and the proportion of educated leaders, particularly clergymen. Then one must consider how far harmonious or contending religious, social, and political groups aided or retarded the development of public education, and how far the forms of local political and economic organization made it easy to legislate for the common good in educational matters. It will be found that even in such a homogeneous population as that of New England, these principles varied not only in the different colonies but even in the different towns of the same colony.

Another important group of factors in New England centers about environment and economic conditions, climate, extent of territory, the character, and distribution of the land, nature of occupations, and particularly the distribution of population in relation to centers where educational agencies could be established and intelligence easily transferred.

Bradford and Winthrop have told us the reasons for the early settlement of New England. Suffice it to say they go deep into English history, religious, economic, and political. That great upheaval of the sixteenth century, the Reformation, bred religious and political dissent from established authority in church and state. It placed emphasis on the worth of the individual man and encouraged the right of private judgment, especially with respect to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Sectarianism, a product of this principle, became one of the strongest forces which promoted intellectual development. For the desire to read and study the Bible and to have their children brought up in the faith of their fathers was one of the most important characteristics of the dissenting sects. The struggle between Churchmen and Dissenters and the flood of controversial literature which it brought forth furnish evidence of the increased mental activity resulting from sectarianism. This was intensified by the determination of such men as James I and Archbishop Laud to put down insurgency of church and state. Thus we can understand why one of the principal motives actuating the New England settlers, both before and after their settlement, was religious, and how closely it was related to education.

First in importance was the Massachusetts Bay colony. In the number, character, distribution, and quality of her educational institutions, she was pre-eminent, and established precedents which greatly influenced other colonies. The Puritan migration to Massachusetts was unique in colonial history for several reasons. The race stock was almost pure English, for the most part of one sect, and of excellent quality. Rev. William Stoughton, in his election sermon of 1668, declared that "God sifted a whole Nation that he might send choice Grain over into this Wilderness."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sibley, *Harvard Graduates*, I, 207.



Again, the proportion of educated leaders was probably higher than in any other colony. Nearly one hundred university graduates of Oxford and Cambridge settled in New England before 1650, most of whom acted as pastors of churches. The progress of civilization depends in large part on the ability and energy of its leaders, and in this respect Massachusetts was most fortunate. Nearly three-fourths of one hundred clergymen mentioned were from the University of Cambridge. More than twenty of these leaders were educated at Emanuel College, Cambridge, and were contemporaries of such men as John Robinson, Oliver Cromwell, and John Milton, who had received a portion of their education in this institution. Among these leaders were John Cotton, Nathaniel Ward, Thomas Shepard, and John Harvard. John Winthrop, the elder, attended Trinity, and Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard, graduated from Magdalen College.<sup>1</sup> The migration to New England to 1643 is commonly reckoned at about 20,000, or 4,000 families. Thus there would be one person in 40 families, or one for every 200 emigrating, who had received university training. It is estimated that Massachusetts had a population of about 9,000 in 1639.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a large proportion of her university men lived within a short distance of Boston or Cambridge. It is safe to say that such a concentration of educated men, in a new settlement, has never been duplicated. They were the intellectual leaders who gave the community its educational ideals. They doubtless influenced the passage of the educational acts and urged their enforcement. Knowing these facts, we can understand why a public school, a printing press, and a college were established in Massachusetts before 1640.

Unlike the leaders of the planter aristocracy of the southern colonies, the religious leaders of the Massachusetts Bay colony believed that the state was responsible for the education of the rising generation without respect to particular classes. Through the act making church membership the basis of the franchise<sup>3</sup> their

<sup>1</sup> See the paper by Franklin B. Dexter, "Influence of the English Universities in the Development of New England," *Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, 1879-80, XVII, 340-52.

<sup>2</sup> For estimates of population in the American colonies see *Proc. Am. Ant. Soc.*, N.S., V, 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Rec. Co. Mass. Bay*, I, 87.

views would greatly influence legislation. It should be noted that almost without exception it is stated or implied in the early educational acts of New England that the principal reason for their passage was the desire to promote religion. By the acts compelling all persons to support and attend church, the people of the towns were brought together weekly. The ministers, so generally university men, had unusual opportunities to influence the people in favor of education. This weekly meeting also furthered social solidarity and community interest—an aid to public support of education.

As environment and general economic conditions have always played an important part in molding human institutions, so we find that these factors had influence upon education in New England. It so happened that the climatic conditions, physiography, extent and nature of the land, and economic forces all favored the group plan of settlement. The severe winters, poor soil, and lack of extensive inland water communication prohibited the production of great staple crops, and hence resulted a population thinly distributed; while at the same time they foreshadowed a society of small farmers, fishing communities, traders, and a greater and greater tendency toward manufactures, as the population increased, and the margin of productivity of the land diminished. It will be noticed that all of these factors almost forced people to settle in groups, rather than as individuals. What effect a different environment would have had on the Puritans had they settled elsewhere, for example in the South, it is impossible to say. But we are certain that the town system, if introduced, could hardly have had the effect on educational development that it had in New England. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that other features of the institutional life of New England necessary for rapid progress in education could have developed in the same manner.

Another important factor aiding the cause of public education in Massachusetts was the land system. Methods of distributing land have had a powerful influence on the development of American institutions.<sup>1</sup> The formation of a community group, occupying a

<sup>1</sup> See M. Eggleston, "The Land System of the New England Colonies," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, Series IV, Nos. 11 and 12.

comparatively small area, was a natural consequence of the desire of the people to be near each other because of the habit of living in villages in England. It was further intensified by the strong religious motive which led to weekly meetings at the church as well as the need of protection from the Indians. The general Court favored the principle of group settlement because it made easier the enforcement of the religious and moral principles involved in the Puritan ideals of a spiritual commonwealth.

These tracts of land, or townships, averaged about forty square miles each and were usually laid out contiguous to each other. Individuals were compelled to settle within the boundary of one of them.<sup>1</sup> Ordinarily a small group of men petitioned the General Court for a township; if the petition was granted the "proprietors," as they were called, could admit other persons and divide up the land as they wished. Usually the greater part of the land was held in common, undivided, until needed. This common land was of great importance, because it could be used for the common good and in the early period was often granted to aid in the support of religion and education.<sup>2</sup>

Still further, this system affected the distribution of population, compelling a density quite remarkable compared with that in the southern colonies, which aided in the development of the principle of taxation of all the people for the support of education. The difficulty of securing agreement on matters of public interest in towns with a widely scattered population as was often the case in the eighteenth century will be a subject for later comment. Thus the compactness of towns in the seventeenth century made possible a neighborliness quite unique, a most important factor in its influence on public education.

The town system of local government had so much influence on educational development, that it warrants close study. Indeed no other unit of local government has promoted so successfully so many aspects of community life, political, religious, social, economic, and intellectual. The word "town" was a name applied to a certain territorial division containing a group of people who

<sup>1</sup> *Rec. Co. Mass. Bay*, I, 167 (March 3, 1635/36).

<sup>2</sup> This point will be discussed in a future paper.

had associated themselves for political, religious, and other purposes in order to satisfy their needs. The state gave this group corporate existence and powers which were of great importance in promoting public education. The historical origin of this unit is a matter of dispute, but whether Germanic, developed from the English parish, of indigenous growth,<sup>1</sup> or a happy combination of all of these, matters little from our standpoint. For the important characteristics of group, in distinction from individual, settlement would remain as well as the resulting influences.

Certain acts passed by the General Court between 1630 and 1638 have an important bearing on the powers of the towns with respect to the subject of education. Up to 1635/36 the groups of people who had associated themselves at various places met in extra-legal assemblies of their own and passed orders for the common good. At this time, March 3, 1635/36, the General Court sanctioned the town system of government by passing an order giving particular powers to towns, such as the power to dispose of lands, make orders for the well-being of the town, lay fines and penalties for breach of orders, choose officers, etc.<sup>2</sup> In 1638 it ordered that every inhabitant should be liable to contribute to all charges both in church and commonwealth, "whereof hee doth or may receive benefit"; and every inhabitant not contributing in proportion to his ability to all common charges, "as well for upholding of the ordinances in the churches as otherwise," should be compelled to do so by assessment and distress.<sup>3</sup> It thus appears that the towns had ample powers conferred upon them to provide for public education if they were so inclined.

By 1642, when the first educational act was passed, twenty-one towns had been founded in Massachusetts and the population had increased to about 9,000<sup>4</sup>. Most of them had a church and a settled minister, who was a university graduate. By this date

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the origin of the town see *Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, 2d ser., VII, 172-263.

<sup>2</sup> *Rec. Co. Mass. Bay*, I, 172.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 240. Previously the General Court had ordered (May 14, 1634) that in all rates and public charges towns were to levy every man according to his estate and other abilities (*ibid.*, I, 120).

<sup>4</sup> *Proc. Am. Ant. Soc.*, N.S., V, 25, note.

children were doubtless becoming numerous, and growing up with meager opportunities for even elementary education. In 1636 the General Court appropriated £400 toward the founding of a college,<sup>1</sup> and two years later John Harvard bequeathed half of his estate for its advancement.<sup>2</sup>

The influence of the educated ministers already mentioned in the founding and nourishing of Harvard College in its early history is of great importance in accounting for the development of elementary and secondary education in Massachusetts, and even in New England as a whole. It was realized that the group of clergymen educated at Cambridge and Oxford would for the most part pass away in a generation. Accordingly there was great fear that an illiterate or uneducated ministry would take their places.

"After God had carried us safe to *New England*, and wee had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our liveli-hood, rear'd convenient places for God's worship, and settled the Civil Government; One of the next things we longed for, and looked after, was to advance *Learning*, and to perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the Dust."<sup>3</sup>

A failure to found a college within a generation or two would thus have been a great calamity from the Puritan standpoint. Not only would educated leaders soon be lacking, but a great stimulus toward the founding of public elementary and secondary schools would have been wanting. It will be seen later that the passage of the Massachusetts act of 1647 was greatly influenced by the desire to provide a school system which would supply the college with students who could be fitted to carry on the work of the group of clergymen educated in England.

But in spite of the extraordinary number of favorable influences and factors, educational progress was slow up to 1647, not only from our standpoint, but, as the evidence shows, quite unsatisfactory to the leaders interested in a more rapid advance. Yet it is the period before 1647, the date of the first act of Massachusetts which compelled towns to set up schools, that needs careful study. For a number of them had, by that date, established some of the important principles of the American public-school system.

<sup>1</sup> *Rec. Co. Mass. Bay*, I, 183.

<sup>2</sup> Quincy, *Hist. Harv. Univ.*, I, 451. The sum amounted to £729 19s. 2d.

<sup>3</sup> *New England's First Fruits*, London, 1643; in Sibley, *Harvard Graduates*, I, 7.